

# Answering the question: What is to be done? (education)

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The question ‘What is to be done?’, Adorno remarked, frequently ‘sabotages the logical progress of knowledge that alone allows for change’. However, despite being always-already-inscribed within the imperatives of instrumental rationality, it is, he acknowledged, nonetheless ‘unavoidable’.<sup>1</sup> This is especially so for the Left, and for a radical philosophy that is obliged to consider what ‘anti-capitalism’ might mean today, beyond its rhetorical functioning as placeholder for a desired solidarity of opposition to the current state of things.

Of course, if this question continues to haunt the Left it is because of the canonical status assured it by Lenin. Published just two years into the last century (its recent centenary deafeningly silent), *What is to be Done?* was the essential communist handbook of organizational tasks for the first part of the twentieth century at least. The relation of its conception of the party to Marx’s remains contentious, as does the degree of its debt to Blanquist–Jacobin ideas of revolutionary conspiracy. But it is certain that little could be less compelling or fashionable today – Slavoj Žižek’s liberal-baiting bid for an ambiguous revival of ‘Lenin *contra* Leninism’ notwithstanding. Indeed, in the intellectual milieu of the Left’s own global ‘theoryworld’,<sup>2</sup> there is near universal agreement that any idea of the party as the privileged organizational form of militant activism has long since outlived its moment.

Unavoidable as it may well be, then, the very question ‘What is to be done?’ can seem somewhat quaint under present circumstances. It implies a sense of collective political power and purpose that few can currently muster. Which begs the question of what it means that it should be asked again today, not in the troubled context of ‘the socialist project’ – as even Adorno might still have understood the promise embodied in that phrase – but in that of an art event, itself conceived under the sign of a certain ‘radicality’? What does this mean for politics and for art, and for the current relationship between them? In what sense might it be ‘in art and its mediation’ that we would find ‘embedded’ a ‘global complex of cultural translation’, which, so Roger Buergel claims, ‘sets the stage for a

potentially all-inclusive public debate’? And what does this suggest about the role played by cultural forms within current reconfigurations of political identities, desires, and conditions of possibility in an emergent global capitalist modernity?

These are not, in themselves, unfamiliar issues. Indeed they have been much debated within the pages of *Radical Philosophy*, as elsewhere, over the last few years. The whole question of the dual contemporary legacy of the concept of the ‘avant-garde’, as historically operative in both politics and art, and the glue that once promised to bind them together, suggests one obvious starting point here. For it is this term that Lenin, in *What is to be Done?*, borrows from the French radical lexicon of the nineteenth century to define the Communist Party’s revolutionary role as ‘vanguard’ (*avangard*). Much once rested upon the precarious intersection this seemed to invite between the Party and the various cultural avant-gardes that flourished during the first decade after 1917 – between the Bolsheviks and those who ‘heard and understood the Revolution’, above all, because ‘its present was dependent on a future’.<sup>3</sup>

The story has been told often enough, and it finds itself repeated, in less overtly dramatic situations, within the histories of various ‘Western’ avant-gardes such as surrealism. Moreover, it is the loss or failure of this conjunction that constitutes at least one motive for the obituary notices for the avant-garde, constantly announced from the early 1960s onwards. Yet the ‘defeat’ of an ‘originary’ instance here does not thereby negate the problematic of the avant-garde, as is too often supposed. (If nothing else, events like Documenta continue to attest to this.<sup>4</sup>) Nor is it clear that it could do so, to the degree that, politically, it is still the artwork’s capacity to be ‘vibrated by the reflexes of the future’ (in Breton’s evocative phrase) that provides its essential criteria of value, and critical meaning, in a global capitalist culture.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the whole question of contemporary art’s capacity to institute some future space for ‘advanced, open and autonomous working practices’, as the Documenta working paper imagines it, is dependent on this.

Nonetheless, and precisely to the extent that the question of the avant-garde ‘continues inexorably to exert its demands and responsibilities’ upon the present, the social and political context within which this happens has patently changed.<sup>6</sup> Vibrated by the reflexes of those demands and responsibilities that constitute the avant-garde’s persistence, at its most productive, this creates an obligation, for what Walter Benjamin called an art that would be ‘based on politics’ to rethink its critical work and social functions under the changed conditions of ‘our’ present. Yet, given this, the desire for a concrete politicization of art, as yet another counter-move to the aestheticization of politics within commodity culture, entails the question of just exactly what ‘politicization’ might *mean* at a historical moment in which the narrative horizons that have hitherto sustained the Left have come to seem untenable. And if this is the point at which artistic questions ‘collide with social questions such as the existence or non-existence of a collective social subject’, then it is the seeming *lack* of such a subject, at least as it was largely taken for granted by the avant-gardes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that thus must frame the question of what it means for a practice to be political today.<sup>7</sup>

It is, in fact, precisely in this light that what is most distinctive about contemporary criticism of the broadly Leninist model of the avant-garde becomes clear. For, necessary as it may be, this criticism often appears to entail that issues of organizational form – the theoretical elaboration of abstract conceptual figures of networks, rhizomes, and so on – run far ahead of any attempt to articulate identifiable political content to such forms, in a determinate sense. No doubt inevitably so. To note as much is not to question the importance of ‘new forms of organization and self-organization’ as themselves a political issue. For it is of course true that, in some fundamental way, political form simply *is* its content; always, but perhaps particularly so for any politics operating under the sign of some radical democracy to come. (Indeed, Leninism might precisely be said to have failed because of its fatal incapacity to come to terms with this.) Yet it can hardly be ignored that where the question of determinate political *possibility* emerges – the basis, once, for the Marxian Left’s rigorous delineation of its difference from all utopianism, for its belief in ‘the real movement which abolishes the present state of things’ – the issue of the concrete contents and processes at stake in contemporary opposition, protest and resistance remains (like Iraq for Tony Blair) the unmentioned elephant in the room.

In practical terms, a tacit agreement to disagree, as the only basis for both coalition and diversity (as manifested in the various metropolitan, national, continental and global social forums), is undoubtedly unavoidable. In fact, it is desirable, on some level, as a democratic ‘good’ in itself. But, as Martin Ryle noted in *Radical Philosophy* 114, it can also amount to an effective agreement to *evade* or *suppress* the question of what is thereby actually at stake in the oppositional endeavours of contemporary anti-capitalism.<sup>8</sup> At the very least, this indeterminacy or self-defining absence – which makes the emphatically futural character of the question ‘What is to be done?’ such a source of anxiety – needs to be made explicit and its implications thought through. (Ironically, this may well be the unintended critical function of Hardt and Negri’s celebrated intervention – its *essential* failure to substantiate the Multitude as a political or social category, in comparison to the analysis of Empire.) Certainly, contemporary political and art theory have something in common at this point. Indeed, from the perspective of the artworld, they can often seem to overlap, in so far as art’s intrinsic relevance is now seen to be located not so much in the critical value accorded to art-specific judgements or forms of experience, as in the wider formal problems of the ‘global complex of cultural translation’ that the artworld engenders.

### Trafficking the avant-garde

Why, then, as Buerger presents it in his third Documenta 12 question, might such a question situate itself today within a global problematic organized around an idea of *education*? Why, indeed, to put it in a rather different way, should it be in redefining art’s vocation in terms of some educative process that an apparently utopian (if not *utopianist*) spark might be located?

Such an idea is hardly foreign to the history of the avant-garde. Using ‘ode or song, story or novel’, writes the utopian socialist Olinde Rodriguez in 1825, ‘we’ the ‘avant-garde’ will ‘spread new ideas amongst men’, staging the basis for art’s recovery of ‘a great political role’ akin to that it played for the ‘peoples of antiquity’.<sup>9</sup> Such general sentiments were familiar for a good hundred years or more to follow. In a more directly political register, they find one echo in the Leninist conception of the party’s vanguard/avant-garde role itself, which establishes the foundation for a distinctive pedagogical determination of the political operativity of both theory and culture. At the same time, they connect with a somewhat different tradition, to be found most clearly in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* – a text that Jacques

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Rancière has recently claimed as an inaugural moment for both the avant-garde and a modern aesthetic regime more generally. Mediating between alienated present and de-alienated future, it is art's 'promise of equality, the promise of a new way of sharing a common world', that provides the basis for an aesthetic education and self-education of humanity as a process of learning to live in a future free political community. For Rancière, it thus 'clears a path to the [romantic] idea of an aesthetic revolution ... fostering the Marxian idea of the "human revolution" by contrast to the merely political revolution, and culminating in the Futurist and Constructivist programmes in the first quarter of the twentieth century'.<sup>10</sup>

Yet it's fairly hard to see this as a plausible model for whatever new *Bildung* might be at stake in the international artworld today. Rather, it threatens simply to repeat the impasses of the romantic linkage of art to politics, through a failure to engage the actual workings of capitalism that condition it at every point. Certainly, to conceive of the artworld's developing and (at least partially) decentralized network of sites, even speculatively, as the generation of some genuinely global *public* space – in which the emergence of an immediate form of de-alienated non-capitalist life and cultural exchange might somehow be visible on the horizon – is sheer romanticism, an abstract utopianism of organizational form. One person's heterotopic enclave is another's gated community (however globally dispersed).<sup>11</sup> At best, only as constituted through some immanent *critique* of the capitalist formation of the social, of its abstraction by the value form – as the production of some reflective form of critical knowledge of that abstraction<sup>12</sup> – would what Buergel envisages as the staging of some politicized 'public debate' around art and its mediation seem to be remotely imaginable or tenable today, given the inherent limitations to any constitution of a 'public' that are all too obviously apparent here. At stake here would not be yet another passage through the consolations of romantic anti-capitalism, but a critical articulation of

the violences of art's own social condition, the larger social divisions and inequalities that determine the division between art and politics themselves.

If, then, it is true that '[a]rtists educate themselves by working through form and subject matter', and 'audiences educate themselves by experiencing things aesthetically',<sup>13</sup> perhaps we still need to think, in a fairly sober and straightforward fashion, about what is entailed by 'education' in some of its most basic senses – that is, as a question, ultimately, about the social relations (and spaces) through which different forms of knowledge are produced. What is, or might be, specifically educational, in any politically productive sense, in the contemporary production and dissemination of forms of knowledge globally? How is access to such forms determined? And how do these relate to the circulation and accumulation of forms of capital in what, as we have long been told, is (at its 'cutting edge' at least) a developing knowledge economy?

The complex relations established in some contemporary art to a social documentary tradition provide one possible case study here. A work like Allan Sekula's photographic sequence *Fish Story* (1995), exhibited at Documenta 11, intrinsically involves, as part of its production and reception, 'practices of research in cultural, economic and social history'. At the level of 'subject matter', these engage, in Buchloh's words, 'the fallen facticity of the world ... [the] sites of cover-ups and myths, of clandestine and concealed "public" operations ... the operations of capital'. This clearly implies an educational (and self-educational) dimension to the piece, a kind of critical revelation and articulation of widening differences of wealth, power, and of relative *inclusion* in a globally networked capitalist modernity, via knowledge of its uneven local manifestations. At the same time, however, formally, as Andrew Fisher puts it, meaning in such a work is conceived as being itself 'produced in exchanges of information that are located in [already existing] systems of communicative practice'. To the extent that this is a 'fundamentally social characteristic', it is 'only ever *actualised* in the form of socially instituted relations of exchange'.<sup>14</sup> What Sekula calls the 'traffic in photographs', in a society organized around commodity production and exchange, cannot be separated from the institutional spaces in which art's production of meaning takes place. The success of a piece like *Fish Story* is predicated on the degree to which it engages *immanently*, in critical fashion, the mechanisms of a 'global complex of cultural translation', inextricably connected to the operations of capital, at the level of both form and subject matter.

Yet, in an important sense, current art-theoretical concerns are less focused on such critical potentials of the individual artwork than, as I have already argued, on the various broader networks of cultural translation, communication and exchange internal to the operations of the artworld itself. The present pre-eminence accorded to the job of the master curator – as ‘an act of presentation that presents itself’, in Boris Groys’s words – over and above that of the individual artist or movement would be, in part, a function of this. More crucially, and more generally, (and not without irony, given the context), it is what appears to be most immediately political about the issues of cultural ‘transfer’ and ‘relationality’ intrinsic to the contemporary art system that would today invite speculation upon the possibility of some new conjoining of art to radical politics, such as Groys suggests in a recent article in this journal. An apparent structural homology, precisely at the level of organizational form, between the international art biennale and the social forum might itself appear as a kind of testimony to this.

Groys’s own choice of example is telling: the exhibition ‘Utopia Station’ curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija for the 2003 Venice Biennale; an exhibition which ‘employed artworks as illustrations, as documents of the search for a social utopia, without emphasizing their autonomous value’.<sup>15</sup> If there is a utopian moment in the form of such phenomena themselves, then one can only presume that it lies in certain formal possibilities immanent to the speculatively ‘global complex of cultural translation’ contemporary art generates at such points; its productive power, in Benjamin’s famous terms, is to create new, always different if connected, significances. It is in this sense that ‘translation’ *produces* new forms of knowledge in a way that might indeed be ‘educational’ in a strong, and at least potentially political, manner. Yet, while, as Barry Schwabsky puts it, the ‘democratic thrust of art emerges where artist and public engage on equal terms’, the curator’s assumption of the job of translator-in-chief can easily construct a ‘position of childlike dependency’ for art’s putative public, who (subject to an instrumentalized model of ‘social inclusion’) apparently still need things translating *for* them.<sup>16</sup>

### More than an analogy?

Does some genuine connection with politics, an analogy that is more than an analogy, hold here? ‘The power of art to change life is indirect’, writes Susan Buck-Morss, ‘But so is (or ought to be) the power of political sovereignty.’ Once *any* ‘work’ enters ‘the interactive

world of the everyday, its use should be allowed and indeed encouraged to transcend the constraints of the creator’s intent’. This is surely the utopian moment in all complexes of translation. And as a model of ‘aesthetic analogy’ rather than ‘instrumental domination’, it might indeed provide one experimental basis for the kind of global public sphere that Buck-Morss herself has perhaps most lucidly and winningly sought to articulate.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, we can hardly afford to ignore what T.J. Clark has called the bad dream of modernism that may accompany it. In such a dream, associated in particular with the readings of architectural and art history in the work of the great Italian theorist Manfredo Tafuri, the avant-garde is perpetually haunted by the possibility that every opposition to the logics of capital ‘comes to seem, in retrospect ... not much more than an idealization of capitalism and its representations’.<sup>18</sup> What if the aesthetic education of modern art has always been the basis not for some learning to inhabit a future de-alienated state, but precisely the production of new forms of subjectivity capable of inhabiting smoothly the alienated spaces of a metropolitan capitalist world? Today perhaps this is the troubled dream of the culturally productive forms of ‘interface’ experience that would educate us to live in an emergent infomatic globality – one open to ever-more-transitory and fugitive flows of capital and commodities, and from which the contemporary art world can hardly be separated.

If so, it’s probably an unavoidable condition of art’s critical articulation of the experiences of capitalist modernity and its capacity to locate, however precariously, latent potentialities within its social formations. Art’s contemporary mediation by and of what Hardt and Negri call the currently ‘hegemonic figure’ of the network itself, as a figure of organizational and spatial form, is exemplary of this. Subject to a utopian construction (that stretches back to Buckminster Fuller at least), which may project it as an expression of ‘the demands of a collective life to come’, it may also, in its openness as form, serve as an ideological veil for capitalist development, helping to ensure, in Tafuri’s words, that ‘the real laws’ of its universe remain unknown. Past utopian projects, like Constant’s *New Babylon*, included in Documenta 11, with its emancipatory visions of absolute flexibility, nomadism and transitoriness, can easily come to seem, in retrospect, as much an ‘aesthetic education’ in what one critic calls free-market ‘dreams of hypermobile and flexible capitalism’ as any speculative transcendence of them.<sup>19</sup>

There is no doubt that new forms of social connectivity on a potentially planetary scale have both

transformed the possibilities and conditions of ‘grass-roots’ politics, and created new kinds of transnational subjectivities, which promise a potential renewal of political imagination. There is every reason to think that art, at least in some both altered and expanded sense, might have a role to play in aspects of its materialization. Yet, as Buck-Morss herself says, it will have to make productive the contradictions inherent in the formation of a public space around it, the antagonisms and divisions that condition and traverse it.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, if the Left ‘project’ is itself a struggle for ‘open communication’, democratic and educational at its core, only a ‘debate’ concerning the relationship of emancipatory praxis to the existing regimes of economic development will make possible a space in which the very question ‘What is to be done?’ might be effectively asked today.

## Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Taboos on the Teaching Profession’ (1965), in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Henry W. Pickford, Columbia University Press, New York, 2005, pp. 187–8.
2. I take this suggestive term ‘theoryworld’, to be conceived in conjunction with the more familiar idea of an ‘artworld’ (with which it often overlaps), from Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, p. 8.
3. Julia Kristeva, ‘The Ethics of Linguistics’, in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, Blackwell, Oxford, 1980, p. 32.
4. As my colleague Stewart Martin noted in his review of Documenta 11 in this journal, in considering its ‘political positioning ... as an agenda for a new form of radical art, it becomes apparent that it indicates transformations of a number of fundamental conceptions of the radical avant-garde’. ‘A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11’, *Radical Philosophy* 122, November/December 2003, p. 9.
5. See David Cunningham, ‘The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism and the Avant-Garde’, *Substance* 107, vol. 34, no. 2, 2005, pp. 47–65.
6. John Roberts, ‘On Autonomy and the Avant-Garde’, *Radical Philosophy* 103, September/October 2000, pp. 25–8.
7. See Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Functionalism Today’, in Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*, Routledge, London and New York, 1997, p. 18.
8. Martin Ryle, ‘Oppositional Mentalities: Intellectuals, Protest and the Left’, *Radical Philosophy* 114, July/August 2002, pp. 2–6.
9. Comte de St Simon [actually Olinde Rodriguez], ‘The Artist, the Savant and the Industrialist’, from *Opinions Littéraires, Philosophiques et Industrielles* (1825), in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Geiger, eds, *Art in Theory 1815–1900*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, pp. 40–41.
10. Jacques Rancière, ‘The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller’, *Radical Philosophy* 126, July/August 2004, p. 13.
11. In the light of Rancière’s intervention, it would be worthwhile rereading the conclusion to Schiller’s final letter (27), which, arriving at the point of a necessary absolute separation between the ‘aesthetic state’ and any actually existing social and political institutions, *for the present*, can end only with the location of the former in ‘some few chosen circles, where conduct is governed ... by the aesthetic nature we have made our own’. Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1967, p. 219.
12. See David Cunningham, ‘Architecture as Critical Knowledge’, in Mark Dorrian, Murray Fraser, Jonathan Hill and Jane Rendell, eds, *Critical Architecture*, Routledge, London and New York, forthcoming 2007.
13. In fact, it’s far from clear that the forms of experience at stake in most recent art are strictly ‘aesthetic’ (as opposed to post-conceptual) in character. See Peter Osborne, ‘Art Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Criticism, Art History and Contemporary Art’, *Art History*, vol. 27, no. 4, September 2004, pp. 651–70; reprinted in Deborah Cherry, ed., *Art: History: Visual: Culture*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2005, pp. 171–90.
14. Andrew Fisher, ‘Anti-Modernism and Narrativity in the Work of Allan Sekula’, in David Cunningham, Andrew Fisher and Sas Mays, eds, *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle, 2005, pp. 169, 163. Buchloh is cited on p. 172. This is not restricted to photography or film. There would be an interesting comparison to be made at this point with the intrinsic ‘practices of research in cultural, economic and social history’ manifested in the form of much recent literature, for example in the poetry of Jeremy Prynne and Allen Fisher or in the novels of W.G. Sebald and Iain Sinclair.
15. Boris Groys, ‘The Politics of Equal Aesthetic Rights’, *Radical Philosophy* 137, May/June 2006, pp. 33, 34.
16. Barry Schwabsky, ‘Patriotism as Paranoia: Steve Kurtz and the Critical Art Ensemble’, *Radical Philosophy* 129, January/February 2005, p. 8.
17. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, MIT Press, 2000, Cambridge, MA, pp. 65–6; Susan Buck-Morss, ‘A Global Public Sphere?’, *Radical Philosophy* 111, January/February 2002, pp. 2–10.
18. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, Yale University Press, New Haven CT, 1999, p. 306.
19. Fredric Jameson, ‘Globalization and Political Strategy’, *New Left Review* 4, July/August 2000, p. 68; Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/2*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, Rizzoli, New York, 1986, p. 357; David Pinder, *Visions of the City*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2005, p. 255. For further elaboration of this point, see David Cunningham, ‘Architecture in an Age of Global Modernity: Tafuri, Jameson and Enclave Theory’, in Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts, eds, *As Radical as Reality Itself: Marxism and the Visual Arts*, Peter Lang, forthcoming 2007. The ambiguous homology of form of Empire and Multitude in Hardt and Negri would also seem to be a function of some of these difficulties.
20. Buck-Morss, *Thinking Past Terror*, pp. 10–11, 7–8.